

Harford purchasing Tudor Hall

2-story cottage is 19th-century home of America's first Shakespearean actors, the Booths

By Mary Gail Hare

sun reporter

August 11, 2006

When asked to be or not to be involved in the future of Tudor Hall, Harford County answered with an \$810,000 offer to buy the 19th-century home of America's first Shakespearean actors -- and the nation's first presidential assassin, John Wilkes Booth.

County officials settle today on the purchase of the two-story, four-bedroom cottage that acclaimed English-born actor Junius Brutus Booth built in 1847 as a country retreat from Baltimore. After his death, his widow raised their 10 children in the home a few miles from downtown Bel Air. Several of those children had successful stage careers, including Edwin Thomas Booth, considered one of America's greatest Shakespearean actors.

"Edwin played 100 consecutive Hamlet performances in New York City just before the Civil War," said Dinah Faber, a Harford County Historical Society volunteer well-schooled in Booth family lore. "His father, Junius, who chose the plans for the house and oversaw its construction, was famous for his portrayal of Richard III."

But it was another actor son who achieved such notoriety that he nearly destroyed the family's good name. John Wilkes Booth, a dashing, popular performer, fired a .41-caliber bullet into Abraham Lincoln's head at Ford's Theatre in April 1865 and sealed his place in history as the United States' first presidential assassin.

"The Booth family lived through the notoriety, and we should too," said County Executive David R. Craig, a former history teacher who pushed to have the home protected and in the public domain. "This is one of the most significant historical sites in the state. It is the birthplace of Shakespeare in America. The Booth family were the Barrymores of the 1800s. Just that alone should generate interest in this building."

Plans for the home's future are undetermined, but county officials are considering a theater museum with space for acting troupes. They expect to seek grant money to offset the cost of the purchase and will soon appoint a nonprofit group to oversee theater-related events at the site.

About seven years ago, the home, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, had fallen into such disrepair that it could have been lost. Its location on 8 acres, surrounded by new subdivisions, was eagerly eyed for development. Instead it went to preservationists.

Robert and Beth Baker bought Tudor Hall in 1999 for \$415,000 at an auction that drew more than 100 people, including an Abraham Lincoln lookalike, theater buffs and a throng of national media.

Several prospective buyers reportedly considered everything from dismantling the cottage to turning it into a bed and breakfast.

The Bakers outbid any nonprofit group, hoping to purchase and restore the property. Then, the couple put another \$400,000 into refurbishing the home.

"You could not live in it the way it was," said Rob Baker. "We definitely had to work to get it to this point."

The Bakers like the challenge of restoration more than living in the finished product, he said. They are moving on to a Darlington property, similar in disrepair to the original state of their present home.

"We are going to start all over," he said. "We hope Tudor Hall will become a museum and an educational tool."

They put the property on the market last spring at \$925,000. When it did not sell at auction in April, the county began negotiating with the seller.

"We are thrilled that the county is purchasing this important building," said Maryanna Skowronski, administrator of the Historical Society of Harford County. "Too many people dwell on the fact that it was the birthplace of John Wilkes Booth, and I don't mean to gloss that over. But it was long the home of the Booth family. They are to American cultural history what the Barrymores and Fondas are today. They were the nation's first popular idols and lauded all over the country."

mary.gail.hare@baltsun.com

[Copyright ©© 2006, The Baltimore Sun](#)